

# OUR SHORT STORY PAGE



## The Gree Gree Bush

by James B. Connolly

**Q**UICK how a man knocking around the world gets here a hint, there a hint, of a thing that has been puzzling him for years, and at last, all of a sudden usually, finds he has all the missing threads straight and untangled in his palm. I have in mind the case of Bowles. Bowles wasn't his right name at all, but we'll call him that, for it was under that name he enlisted in the navy, where they still speak of him as the "Gree Gree Man." But that enlistment occurred later.

What I am about to say now of Bowles' doings on the West Coast is the running up of what I learned at different times from a dozen people—a couple of ship captains, a boss's mate in the navy, a dozen sailors, stokers, and so on, who happened to be on the West Coast when Bowles was there. Out there Bowles fell in with old Chief Thomson, who used to run things pretty much to suit himself over a country larger than many a European nation controlled.

Thomson was a name that Bowles, though Kipp was the name he took out there, possibly Bowles, coming of a hard-fisted trading ancestry, showed the old fellow a few new commercial tricks.

Old Chief was at the head of a dozen secret societies—at least half a dozen. Africa is rotten with secret societies, worse than any white country. One society, old Chief Thomson made little secret of—Africa for the Africans was what meant.

There was a sort of branch of the society that old Chief would not talk so freely about; but the scheme, so 'twas said, was to take boys and girls, especially girls, when they were young, and train them, so that by and by they would be able to train the coming race, to lead them to better things. The girls brought up like that used to be hid in the jungle, where if any man was found, he was put to death. Of this society, old Chief was believed to be Zoth, which meant Grand Knight, Grand Master, Exalted Ruler, Great Mogul, whatever anybody wants to call it, and clear on up to the 133d degree.

Of course, though talky negroes sometimes gave out hints, all this was mostly guesswork with the whites. There never was one who really knew anything about them. Unless it was this same Bowles. And that was one thing they all had against Bowles—he was making up with the blacks against his own; and later when he got tangled up, and they got after him, in the Berg mystery, it was as much because of his being on the side of the natives as for the belief that he had a hand in Berg's death. This Berg was a steamer captain, one of the best of his time, the West Coast, an American, a fine sort according to the rating of his kind, and he had married, many years before this, a girl who, it was whispered, had negro blood in her. Traders' lies!

However, this day he went up the river to meet old Chief, taking his daughter with him. The mother being dead, she lived on the steamer with her father. Captain Berg intended only to run up to the lagoon and back; but he was a great gambler and he wound up by joining in a little game with Bowles and young Chief Thomson, who was now back from England. Next morning, Captain Berg's body was found by his crew, floating in the lagoon. It was known he could not swim, and as Thomson and Bowles said he had been drinking during the game, it was not hard to believe that he had fallen into the lagoon while looking for his landing.

But his daughter? She had gone with her father, Bowles and young Chief said, and, of course, she must have drowned with him. Well, they waited for her body to come up. But it didn't come, whereupon people began to talk. They could not reach young Chief, old Chief being too much power for that, but Bowles had to get out. Old Chief and young Chief together could not save him. If he had not gone, some of Captain Berg's crew—he had two or three desperate ones among them—would surely have killed him. So he hurried away, this time to Manila, where he enlisted in the navy.

I was a chief water tender at this time on one of the heavy-armed cruisers of the Asiatic squadron, and there was an ordinary seaman who was also a great teller, and I got some of the story, and later, he used to make, oh, maybe, two hundred dollars a month over and above his pay. And being the best-hearted fellow in the world, he generally gave it away again.

Well, we were lying in Nagasaki one day when Haley broke his liberty and came aboard good and drunk. It happened to be right after some American blue-jackets had been paying seventeen prices for things and then not getting the real article, though not for anything like that did our fellows begin the trouble. It was that some of them'd made the Chinese cruise before and so happened to know the money there, and when this fellow chap tried to short-change them it was like sending general quarters. There must have been about a dozen or fifteen ship people sounded off that day. Well, our ship's party was known to've been around there at the time, and the Japanese merchant who'd lost some money and come aboard, he picked out Tailor Haley as the man that started the trouble in his place, and a Japanese policeman backed him up.

Now Tailor knew as we found out later, that it was a chief of police who'd come so near to putting this particular merchant out of commission, and Tailor knew, too, that that same chief water tender was drunk when he did it, so drunk that he didn't remember about it when he came to. Somebody had to go to the brig for it, and Tailor, with never a word, went; that is, no word except to say, to whiten a little black mark against the service. "I was too drunk at the time to know what I was doing."

However, after a summary court-martial, he was dishonorably discharged, but the sealing charge not proved. The officers, knowing Tailor, wouldn't stand for that.

Now, I knew that Tailor didn't do it. How? Well, Tailor and myself were great chums, and the afternoon this thing happened we were in tea house with the Gekko girls dancing and we sitting cross-legged on the mats, drinking tea while we watched 'em.

Now, casting back to make out why Tailor stood for what he did, I remembered—and there were but few men for whom I had such a liking—that day before we left San Francisco and the two sisters of this chief water tender who came aboard to bid him good-by. And this chief water tender, in spite of what had happened to Tailor, was a good fellow. And if he hadn't been we'd have overlooked it for the sake of his sisters.

They certainly made prizes of the whole chief water tender crew. They had everything going to go to—looks and figure and the quick wit, and the heart that's more than all. And so maybe you'll understand—Tailor worshipping on the edge of the crowd and that chief water tender, the brother of these girls, hoping to go up for his warrant before long. Do you see what it meant to the chief water tender and the kind of chap Tailor was—in his fourth enlistment and still an ordinary seaman.

Well, Tailor was dishonorably discharged, and there he was broke and blue, and ten thousand miles

from home. So I beat the decks with a paper, one mess after the other, and they gave like sailors and blue-jackets: chief petty officers five dollars, first-class men four dollars, second-class three, and so on down to the young apprentice boys, who gave a dollar each; and many would have given more, a month's pay some of them, if they'd been allowed. Everybody gave but one fellow—well, I won't disgrace any branch of the service by saying, as you can guess—was in; but this fellow—Bowles, as you can guess—instead of money gives me a lecture. Said Tailor shouldn't get anything from anybody. Deserved no pity—ought to have saved for a rainy day. "The sun don't shine every day," I remember him saying.

"Well, after Tailor was put ashore, three or four of us, friends of Tailor's, made up our minds that the best chance Bowles would give us would throw him. We'd already come to believe that 'twas his love for the Jap's cash box, and not in drink when he did it either. So we rigged up a game one day to make the Master-at-Arms open up his ditty-box and, sure enough, there was more gold than ever he drew from the paymaster. Well, that was no proof, one gold piece being pretty much like another; but only one thing did all of us here believe. And to think of him putting the Jap merchant and the policeman up to saying 'twas Tailor did that job. There was so much feeling against Bowles that all hands took to watching him night and day—and at last he was put on the beach.

We all thought we'd seen the last of him then. But one day on our way home, in Callao a year or so later, we had a big international race—English, French, German, Italian, a dozen crews. I was stoker of our ship's crew. A good hard race, and forty thousand dollars came in to us when we crossed the line. And all I could raise I bet on that race, and when I went ashore it was with twelve hundred dollars in my clothes, of course. It wouldn't do to take that bundle of money back to the States, so I was setting out to burn it, with a couple of good lads in my own division to help hold a match to it now and then.

And walking up from the ferry, that stone jetty with the big clock on the sort of a lighthouse, who should we meet but Bowles. There was every mark that he had gone to pieces. I saw him, but didn't let on to know him. But he signaled and I stopped. Maybe he thought I'd speak first, but I didn't. I only looked him over. Did you ever do that to a man down and out? He must be a bad one to do that, mustn't he? Well, this was a bad one—I haven't hinted at the half about him. And his eyes were as hunted dogs' eyes, his lips like a child's that expects to be struck down. "Glavin," he started.

"You mean Mr. Glavin, don't you?" I said. "It was plain Glavin once," he says, "or maybe you've got your warrant by this?"

On my word, I didn't think he had so much spunk in him. "No," I says, "I haven't got my warrant and it's still plain Glavin—to shipmates and friends."

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might be, I heard women's voices from inside repeating something, like as if it might be a prayer, after some leader.

They were only long white robes with a red sash around their waists, and they were all barefooted and bare-armed and all black or brown—except one, who looked to be a white girl. Her I'd noticed from the first.

Just before she died in the door of the building near my end, she looked up, and her eyes they doubled her loveliness. I don't know what made me—I never'd been given to speaking to strange women—"Look for me to-night," I called out, and whistled like a whippoorwill and slid down from the wall.

"Ah-h—tonight!" said a voice from behind me. I turned. There was a white man with a revolver aimed at me.

"Well, what do you want?" I said. It was almost dusk, mind. He jumped back with a queer noise in his throat, which made me take a sharper look. "What?" It was—but I could hardly believe it—Bowles!

I jumps for him. He runs, but in four leaps I had him, and throwing my weight into his back and slapping him to the ground, I took the revolver from him and turned his face up to what light was left. Sure enough it was the face I'd last seen that day on the dock in Callao.

I stuck the revolver in my jacket pocket, stood up and said, "Look here—you know I love you, don't you?"

He didn't say anything to that. "Well, look here," I said again, and gripped him by the throat. "Now tell me what I want to know." I eased up on his throat. "Who are these women—these girls?"

"They're sacred. It's death if you're caught looking in on them—death even to be here. Only the Zoth and the council can visit here, and then they must all go together at some appointed time."

"Then what are you doing here?"

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Next thing I remember I was lying in some kind of a low shack with a dim light in one corner and a negro, fanning himself in another, and two negroes armed, each with a big knobby war club and a heavy revolver—and no old-fashioned make, but as modern as any officer's service weapon—a queer combination, I thought, as I did think.

A white man came in. It was Bowles, I saw—after a while. Then I closed my eyes again. He bent over me and put his eyes close to mine. I could feel him, his sweat out then, but soon returned with the alger, Dalke, who fed me a bowl of rice and a cup of some kind of kola nut preparation.

The tomcats stopped, and then another nigger came in and said something to Dalke, and he motioned to me as if to say that if I had done eating we would go. They led me then, with torchbearers ahead and behind me, by way of a jungle path, up perhaps a quarter mile to a building that was maybe sixty by forty, with an earth floor, high slatted enough for two stories, and the whole side wall solid all the way up except for half a dozen slits up under the roof, as if for ventilation.

The place was rigged up like a ballroom of most any secret society in our country, except that there was only one platform and pedestal, at the further end from where they stood me. Thomson stood there. All around, the others stood along the two long sides of the room, close together.

They kept me standing there with nothing said or done for maybe ten minutes. Not one of them looked away from me, but I paid no attention to them. It was Thomson I was meaning to see.

Bowles and Dalke had been sent out and now they came back, the door being unlatched for them after a queer knock three times given, and now they led in Captain Berg's daughter. She was dressed in white as when I had seen her, and plainly the dread of something terrible was in her eyes, but no trembling or drawing back. They placed her face to me, and

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back and drew them close, felt for their skin coverings, pulled them off and threw them over her. "Lay there till it's over," I said, and also pulled the two bodies—I made sure they were dead by a few more jabs—and curled them around in front and above her. At the same time I took the revolvers from their belts.

They were calling to each other now as if to get together, and somebody said something—Thomson's voice I thought—and I saw a little light, as if somebody had just struck a match. The light flared up. I aimed at the light before it could get blazing. A yell came, and at that I began shooting right and left. Whatever happened was the worse for them. There were seventy or eighty of them and only one of me. In no time all hands were shooting, while I lay on the ground near the bodies guarding the girl and let them shoot. Feeling another body fall near me, I reached over, and to make no mistake I drove my big knife into him—and drew him alongside.

"You'll be safe now," I said.

And I waded in. And that big knife, fifteen inches long, double-edged and heavy—without any trying I could have reached the heart of a bullock with it. Every stroke was a sure dead man, but pretty near it. Never a one I struck that didn't go down—it not dead, well on the way to it. And when they yelled, and before I'd killed half a dozen fresh ones, they were in a new panic, and I could hear all hands at it again, striking out with their war clubs. Then was my danger—that one of them would accidentally hit me.

When I felt a man alive that most astonished grunt at close quarters, I took no chances, but whipped out my knife and stabbed quick and hard.

One time they quit yelling—Thomson's voice, I think, ordering; but I wasn't even sure of that, so crazy was I getting with all voices beginning to sound a good deal alike to me. They stopped and I could hear them crowding together into the middle of the place. I guessed there were half a dozen yet, and that wouldn't do; so I dove in among 'em and started swinging, and no mortal man, white or yellow, or black, could have stood there and been hammered and cracked by an invisible hand—like black death itself—in that black place, and not struck back.

That's where I had 'em. And I went among 'em with my sword, only when I felt a body quick would I stop, and only then for a part of a second to make sure, and then it was lean forward and duck low and be him have it.

Of course, I got caught a few times. With bunches of 'em clustered in that dark I couldn't always dodge 'em. But when that happened and I went down under 'em, I used the knife loose and moved and heaved 'em off me in a hurry. 'Twas like heaving the line off you in football, and I was a lousy lad in those days. Of course, I got out and bruised and what with the bruises and loss of blood I started with, I began to feel weak.

"A little more," I remember I kept saying to myself, and it ought to be. That's all right, slipperily around my feet. I felt half a dozen times quick there were so many of 'em on the floor, and I was getting muddled. At the last of it I let myself down on the floor and crawled among 'em. And 'twasn't till I felt there were no more of 'em left in the open that I began to wonder had I missed any in the corners. My mind wasn't clear at the beginning of the place, and I was sure not for a while after. I think now that I was by this time half-crazy. I felt and pounded in the corners, but no live one there. And then I stumbled onto the platform for the first time. There was one there. At first I thought he was dead like the others, but he moved under me. "Ah, but you're a cute one!" I said. I knew him. And when I'd think I did. Dropped knife and club and went at him.

Half-crazy? Sure I was. "I got you, Thomson," I says, and he said something. I don't remember to this day what it was. And do you know how I fixed him? I squeezed his big neck between my fingers, and I never let go till he fell from me, weakening—triple his neck I guess, I don't know. And don't forget, I squeezed him from the time I first laid myself breathing like a man just come through a miserable run. And there it is. Oh, terribly tired! And so I guessed I'd call it off, and wear over by the door and reached my hand out for the girl. "Are you there?" I asked.

"Look to think that you're alive!" she reached out and caught me by the hand. "It's all over. And what you must have gone through! Oh, the morning was only here so I could be of use to you!"

"It will soon be here," I said, and sure enough, he and by the rays of light came through the slits up near the roof. Then voices outside and a step at the door and the signal knock—three times repeated. I answered by the same knock I had heard them giving earlier in the night.